

by Karen Greenberg

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Tomgram: Karen Greenberg, How *Zero Dark Thirty* Brought Back the Bush Administration

We got Osama bin Laden -- and now, for millions of Americans, we'll get him again onscreen as *Zero Dark Thirty* hits your neighborhood multiplex. [Lauded](#) and [criticized](#), the film's the talk of the town. But it's hardly the only real-life CIA film that needed to be made. Here, for the record, are five prospective films, all potentially suspenseful, all involving CIA daring-do, and all with plenty of opportunities for blood and torture, that are unlikely to make it into those same multiplexes in your lifetime. Let's start with the CIA's 1953 coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, whose democratically elected government had nationalized the country's oil industry. What a story! It couldn't be oilier, involving

[BP](#)

in an earlier incarnation, the CIA, British intelligence, bribery, secretly funded street demonstrations, and (lest you think there'd be no torture in the film) the installation of an autocratic regime that would create a fearsome secret police and torture opponents for decades to come. All of this was done in the name of what used to be called "the Free World." That "successful" coup was the

[point of origin](#)

for just about every disaster and bit of "blowback" -- a term

[first used](#)

in the CIA's secret history of the coup -- in U.S.-Iranian relations to this day. Many of the

[documents](#)

have

[been released](#)

and whatta story it turned out to be! Hollywood, where are you?

Or here's another superb candidate: the [CIA's Phoenix Program](#) in Vietnam. Boy, if you want a little torture porn, try that baby. Meant to wipe out the Vietcong's political infrastructure, it managed to knock off an estimated 20,000 Vietnamese, remarkably few of whom were classified as "senior NLF cadres." (Reportedly, the program was regularly used by locals to settle grudges.) It was knee -- maybe waist -- deep in blood, torture, assassination, and death.

It's the Agency we've come to know and love. But hold your breath waiting for

Good Evening, Vietnam

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For a change of pace, how about a CIA-inspired torture comedy? We're talking about the rollicking secret kidnapping of a radical Muslim cleric off the streets of Milan in early 2003, his transport via U.S. airbases in Italy and Germany to Egypt, and there, evidently with the CIA station chief for Italy riding shotgun, directly into the hands of Egyptian torturers. What makes this an enticing barrel of laughs was the way the CIA types involved in the covert operation rang up almost \$150,000 in five-star hotel bills as they gallivanted around Italy, ate at five-star restaurants, vacationed in Venice after the kidnapping, ran up impressive tabs on forged credit cards for their fake identities, and were such bunglers that they were identified and charged for the abduction in absentia by the Italian government. Most [were convicted](#) and given stiff jail sentences, again in absentia. (No more Venetian holidays for them!) It's the CIA's version of a [La Dolce Vita torture caper](#) and obviously screams for the Hollywood treatment.

Or how about a torture tragedy? None can top the story of [Khaled el-Masri](#), an unemployed car salesman from Germany on vacation in Macedonia, who, on New Year's Eve 2003, was pulled off a bus and [kidnapped](#) by the CIA because his name was similar to that of an al-Qaeda suspect. After spending five months under brutal conditions, in part in an "Afghan" prison called "the Salt Pit" ([run by](#) the CIA), he was left at the side of a road in Albania. In between, his life was a [catalogue](#) of horrors, torture, and abuse.

Finally, who doesn't like the idea of a torture biopic? And the perfect subject's out there. He was just [front-paged](#) in a major profile in the *New York Times*. Former CIA agent John Kiriakou was an al-Qaeda hunter, led the team that captured that outfit's logistics specialist Abu Zubaydah, and is the only CIA agent in any way associated with the Agency's torture activities who will go to jail. And here's the sort of twist that any moviemaker should love: he [never tortured anyone](#). He spoke out against it. He just leaked information, including the name of an undercover agent, to journalists. Russell Crowe would be perfect in the role. Adventure, blood, torture, injustice, irony -- what more could you ask for?

Instead, of course, what we've got this week is a bloody-minded nostalgia film, writes [TomDispatch regular](#) Karen Greenberg.

Zero Dark Thirty

, she says, is

The Way We Were

for those still in mourning over the departure of George W., Dick, Rummy, and the only national security advisor we've ever had who came into office with a

[double-hulled oil tanker](#)

named after her. And who should know more about what they did? Greenberg, the Director of the Center on National Security at Fordham Law School, has written, among other works,

[*The Least Worst Place: Guantanamo's First 100 Days*](#)

and

[*The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*](#)

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Learning to Love Torture, *Zero Dark Thirty*-Style

Seven Easy, Onscreen Steps to Making U.S. Torture and Detention Policies Once Again Palatable

By Karen J. Greenberg

On January 11th, 11 years to the day after the Bush administration opened its [notorious prison](#) at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba,

Zero Dark Thirty

, Kathryn Bigelow's deeply flawed movie about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, opens nationwide. The filmmakers and distributors are evidently ignorant of the significance of the date -- a perfect indication of the carelessness and thoughtlessness of the film, which will unfortunately substitute for actual history in the minds of many Americans.

The sad fact is that *Zero Dark Thirty* could have been written by the tight circle of national security advisors who counseled President George W. Bush to create the post-9/11 policies that led to Guantanamo, the global network of borrowed "

[black sites](#)

" that added up to an offshore universe of injustice, and the

[grim torture practices](#)

-- euphemistically known as "enhanced interrogation techniques" -- that went with them. It's also a film that those in the Obama administration who have championed non-accountability

for such shameful policies could and (
[evidently did](#)

) get behind. It might as well be called

Back to the Future, Part IV

, for the film, like the country it speaks to, seems stuck forever in that time warp moment of revenge and hubris that swept the country just after 9/11.

As its core, Bigelow's film makes the bald-faced assertion that torture *did* help the United States track down the perpetrator of 9/11.

Zero Dark Thirty

-- for anyone who doesn't know by now -- is the story of Maya (Jessica Chastain), a young CIA agent who believes that information from a detainee named Ammar will lead to bin Laden. After weeks, maybe months of torture, he does indeed provide a key bit of information that leads to another piece of information that leads... well, you get the idea. Eventually, the name of bin Laden's courier is revealed. From the first mention of his name, Maya dedicates herself to finding him, and he finally leads the CIA to the compound where bin Laden is hiding. Of course, you know how it all ends.

However compelling the heroine's determination to find bin Laden may be, the fact is that Bigelow has bought in, hook, line, and sinker, to the ethos of the Bush administration and its apologists. It's as if she had followed an old government memo and decided to offer in fictional form step-by-step instructions for the creation, implementation, and selling of Bush-era torture and detention policies.

Here, then, are the seven steps that bring back the Bush administration and should help Americans learn how to love torture, Bigelow-style.

First, Rouse Fear. From its opening scene, *Zero Dark Thirty* equates our post-9/11 fears with the need for torture. The movie begins in darkness with the actual heartbreaking cries and screams for help of people trapped inside the towers of the World Trade Center: "I'm going to die, aren't I?... It's so hot. I'm burning up..." a female voice cries out. As those voices fade, the black screen yields to a full view of Ammar being roughed up by men in black ski masks and then strung up, arms wide apart.

The sounds of torture replace the desperate pleas of the victims. "Is he ever getting out?"

Maya asks. "Never," her close CIA associate Dan (Jason Clarke) answers. These are meant to be words of reassurance in response to the horrors of 9/11. Bigelow's first step, then, is to echo former Vice-President Dick Cheney's mantra from that now-distant moment in which he [claimed](#)

the nation needed to go to "the dark side."

That was part of his impassioned demand that, given the immense threat posed by al-Qaeda, going beyond the law was the only way to seek retribution and security.

Bigelow also follows Cheney's lead into a world of fear. The Bush administration understood that, for their global dreams, including a future invasion of Iraq, to become reality, fear was their best ally. From Terre Haute to El Paso, Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine, Americans were to be regularly reminded that they were deeply and eternally endangered by terrorists.

Bigelow similarly keeps the fear monitor bleeping whenever she can. Interspersed with the narrative of the bin Laden chase, she provides often blood-filled footage from terrorist attacks around the globe in the decade after 9/11: the 2004 bombings of oil installations in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, that killed 22; the 2005 suicide bombings in London that killed 56; the 2008 Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad that killed 54 people; and the thwarted Times Square bombing of May, 2010. We are in constant jeopardy, she wants us to remember, and uses Maya to remind us of this throughout.

Second, Undermine the Law. Torture is illegal under both American and international law. It was only pronounced "legal" in a series of [secret memorandums](#) produced by the Bush Justice Department and approved at the highest levels of the administration. (Top officials, including Cheney and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, evidently even had torture techniques [demonstrated](#)

for them in the White House before green-lighting them.) Maintaining that there was no way Americans could be kept safe via purely legal methods, they asked for and were given secret legal authority to make torture the go-to option in their Global War on Terror. Yet Bigelow never even nods toward this striking rethinking of the law. She assumes the legality of the acts she portrays up close and personal, only hedging her bets toward the movie's end when she indicates in passing that the legal system was a potential impediment to getting bin Laden. "Who the hell am I supposed to ask [for confirmation about the courier], some guy at Gitmo who's all lawyered up?" asks Obama's national security advisor in the filmic run-up to the raid.

Just as new policies were put in place to legalize torture, so the detention of terror suspects without charges or trials (including people who, we now know, were [treated horrifically](#) despite

being innocent of anything) became a foundational act of the administration. Specifically, government lawyers were employed to create particularly tortured (if you'll excuse the word) legal documents

[exempting detainees](#)

from the Geneva Conventions, thus enabling their interrogation under conditions that blatantly violated domestic and international laws.

Zero Dark Thirty accepts without hesitation or question the importance of this unconstitutional detention policy as crucial to the torture program. From the very first days of the war on terror, the U.S. government rounded up individuals globally and began to question them brutally. Whether they actually had information to reveal, whether the government had any concrete evidence against them, they held hundreds -- in the end, [thousands](#) -- of detainees in U.S. custody at secret CIA black sites worldwide, in the prisons of allied states known for their own torture policies, at Bagram Detention Center in Afghanistan, and of course at Guantanamo, which was the crown jewel of the Bush administration's offshore detention system.

Dan and Maya themselves not only travel to secret black sites to obtain valuable information from detainees, but to the cages and interrogation booths at Bagram where men in those now-familiar orange jumpsuits are shown awaiting a nightmare experience. Bigelow's film repeatedly suggests that it was crucially important for national security to keep a pool of potential information sources -- those detainees -- available just in case they might one day turn out to have information.

Third, Indulge in the Horror: Torture is displayed onscreen in what can only be called pornographic detail for nearly the film's first hour. In this way, *Zero Dark Thirty*

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eerily mimics the obsessive, essentially fetishistic approach of Bush's top officials to the subject. Cheney, former Secretary of Defense

[Donald Rumsfeld](#)

, Cheney's former Chief of Staff David Addington, and

[John Yoo](#)

from the Office of Legal Counsel, among others, plunged into the minutiae of "enhanced interrogation" tactics, micro-managing just what levels of abuse should and should not apply, would and would not constitute torture after 9/11.

In black site after black site, on victim after victim, the movie shows acts of torture in exquisite detail, Bigelow's camera seeming to relish its gruesomeness: waterboarding, stress positions,

beatings, sleep deprivation resulting in memory loss and severe disorientation, sexual humiliation, containment in a small box, and more. Whenever she gets the chance, Bigelow seems to take the opportunity to suggest that this mangling of human flesh and immersion in brutality on the part of Americans is at least understandable and probably worthwhile. The film's almost subliminal message on the subject of torture should remind us of the way in which a form of sadism-as-patriotic-duty filtered down to the troops on the ground, as evidenced by the [now infamous 2004 photos](#) from Abu Ghraib of smiling American soldiers offering [thumbs-up responses](#) to their ability to humiliate and hurt captives in dog collars.

Fourth, Dehumanize the Victims. Like the national security establishment that promoted torture policies, Bigelow dehumanizes her victims. Despite repeated beatings, humiliations, and aggressive torture techniques of various sorts, Ammar never becomes even a faintly sympathetic character to anyone in the film. As a result, there is never anyone for the audience to identify with who becomes emotionally distraught over the abuses. Dehumanization was a necessary tool in promoting torture; now, it is a necessary tool in promoting *Zero Dark Thirty*, which desensitizes its audience in ways that should be frightening to us and make us wonder who exactly we have become in the years since 9/11.

Fifth, Never Doubt That Torture Works. Given all this, it's a small step to touting the effectiveness of torture in eliciting the truth. "In the end, everybody breaks, bro': it's biology," Dan says to his victim. He also repeats over and over, "If you lie to me, I hurt you" -- meaning, "If I hurt you, you won't lie to me." Maya concurs, telling Ammar, bruised, bloodied, and begging for her help, that he can stop his pain by telling the truth.

How many times does the American public need to be told that torture did *not* yield the results the government promised? How many times does it need to be [said](#) that waterboarding Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, 183 times obviously didn't work? How many times does it need to be pointed out that torture can -- and did -- produce misleading or false information, notably in the torture of [Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi](#), the Libyan who ran an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan and who confessed under torture that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

Sixth, Hold No One Accountable. The Obama administration made the [determination](#) that holding Bush administration figures, CIA officials, or the actual torturers responsible for what

they did in a court of law was far more trouble than it might ever be worth. Instead, the president chose to

[move on](#)

and officially

[never look back](#)

. Bigelow takes advantage of this passivity to suggest to her audience that the only downside of torture is the fear of accountability. As he prepares to leave Pakistan, Dan tells Maya, "You gotta be real careful with the detainees now. Politics are changing and you don't want to be the last one holding the dog collar when the oversight committee comes..."

The sad truth is that *Zero Dark Thirty* could not have been produced in its present form if any of the officials who created and implemented U.S. torture policy had been held accountable for what happened, or any genuine sunshine had been thrown upon it. With scant public debate and no public record of accountability, Bigelow feels free to leave out even a scintilla of criticism of that torture program. Her film is thus one more example of the fact that without accountability, the pernicious narrative continues, possibly gaining traction as it does.

Seventh, Employ the Media. While the Bush administration had the Fox television series *24* as a weekly reminder that torture keeps us safe, the current administration, bent on its no-accountability policy, has Bigelow's film on its side. It's the perfect piece of propaganda, with all the appeal that naked brutality, fear, and revenge can bring.

Hollywood and most of its critics have [embraced](#) the film. It has already been named among the best films of the year, and is considered a shoe-in for

[Oscar nominations](#)

. Hollywood, that one-time bastion of liberalism, has provided the final piece in the perfect blueprint for the whitewashing of torture policy. If that isn't a happily-ever-after ending, what is?

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